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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9965

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1864

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0943

RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2693

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001200

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PINR PINS PREL PHUM BG

SUBJECT: JATIYA PARTY SUPPORTS AWAMI LEAGUE BUT STRIKES A HARD BARGAIN AS BANGLADESH TENTATIVELY PREPARES FOR POLLS

REF: DHAKA 1175

DHAKA 00001200 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) As Bangladesh's third largest party, former President Ershad, s Jatiya Party (JP) is well positioned to play the role of kingmaker in the country, s upcoming parliamentary elections. Ershad seeks to maximize the number of JP candidates nominated by the Awami League-led &Grand Alliance8 even as he holds out hope the next Parliament will elect him President. On November 14, the JP announced its list of candidates in preparation for negotiations for seat allocation among its alliance partners. AL President Sheikh Hasina and Ershad met November 18 to iron out details of their electoral alliance and develop a response to the BNP, s demand that elections be postponed. If these discussions are unsuccessful, most expect the JP to revive talks with the AL, s chief rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or join a possible Four Party Alliance boycott. Though the JP states that it will participate in the elections under the current schedule, it also supports the BNP, s attempts to postpone the date and indicated that it could change its course if the BNP decided to boycott the elections.

A sordid undemocratic past

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¶2. (C) While serving as Chief of Army Staff following the assassination of BNP-founder President Ziaur Rahman, Hossain Muhammad Ershad seized power from the President of Bangladesh in March 1982 and declared himself chief martial law administrator. Ershad later became President in December 1983 and subsequently created the JP in 1986 to effectively legitimize his tenure. Ershad, s tenure turned out to be the longest period of autocratic rule in the country, s history. In 1988, after major political parties boycotted the election, the JP ran unopposed and won an absolute majority in the national parliament. This lasted until December 1990, when a united opposition forced Ershad to step down. The courts later convicted Ershad on several corruption charges and he has since been in and out of jail several times. Ershad, s legacy in power was mixed: his regime introduced village councils and land reform but also passed constitutional amendments legalizing the military coup and declaring Islam the state religion. Today many Bangladeshis remember Ershad in other less positive ways--for introducing massive corruption into the administration as well as for his colorful personal life.

Returning from the abyss

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¶3. (C) Following the country's return to democratic rule in 1991 and Ershad's subsequent imprisonment, the JP was almost relegated to political oblivion outside its stronghold in the former President's home area, Rangpur. After briefly uniting to bring down Ershad, however, sharp divisions emerged between the AL and BNP. Ironically, this divide provided the JP a way back into the mainstream, even as other third parties failed to take root. Ershad's supporters elected him from prison in 1991 and 1996. Most recently, the JP won 14 seats (mainly from Northern Bangladesh) in the 2001 parliamentary elections.

Is it a one man show?

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¶4. (C) The JP survives largely based on a cult of personality surrounding its founder, General Ershad. Several large pictures of the former dictator while he was in power greet visitors to the party offices. The JP's support base is concentrated primarily in the northern districts of Bangladesh near Ershad's ancestral home. The party platform\*food for the poor, ensuring food security, rural electrification, education and land reform\*hardly appears distinct from the development goals espoused by the major parties. According to the party's Secretary General, Bangladeshis will vote for JP because they &realize that General Ershad did a lot for the country<sup>8</sup> in terms of development and building the country's infrastructure. In the past, Ershad assured USG visitors he is confident that the people of Bangladesh will turn to him when they tire of

DHAKA 00001200 002.2 OF 002

the two Begums.

Kingmaker or spoiler?

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¶5. (C) The party has high hopes for the upcoming elections and envisions itself as playing the role of kingmaker in the new government. Under the terms of its proposed electoral alliance with the AL, the JP wants to run unopposed in 50-60 of the country's constituencies. The party also demands that parliament select Ershad as President and dismiss all court cases pending against him. He claims that it has a written agreement to that effect. Ershad longs to return to the President's office as a vindication of his past tenure.

¶6. (C) According to party Presidium members, though the alliance has been announced, details of the deal are still being finalized. If negotiations break down, some have argued that the JP should attempt to take a similar initiative with the BNP. While the JP's demands may be excessive, the AL's growing confidence that it can form a government on its own has weakened Ershad's bargaining power. If the BNP boycotts the polls, Jatiya could assume the role of the Opposition in Parliament. JP Secretary General Ruhul Amin Howlader noted that the party would do &whatever was necessary<sup>8</sup> to return to government after being frozen out of power for the past 17 years. While Howlader says the JP only wants to &help the people,<sup>8</sup> it is likely that many in the party would like to help themselves to government resources. Howlader admitted there were &no permanent enemies or friends<sup>8</sup> in politics. JP leaders also pointed out that the party was considering boycotting the elections if the BNP decided not to participate. (Note: Howlader is a former member of the BNP and heads the party faction most inclined to cooperate with other &nationalist forces.<sup>8</sup> Former Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud has led negotiations with the Awami League leadership and is trying to position himself for a high-profile job in the next parliament.)

Comment

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¶7. (C) The JP appears poised to play a key role\*whether that of kingmaker or spoiler--in the upcoming elections despite the party,s waning strength. In private, Awami League leaders predict the JP would only add about 15 seats to the Alliance totals in the upcoming parliamentary elections. This reflects a steady decline in the party,s popularity since it scored a surprising 35 seats in the 1991 parliament. The bad blood between Ershad and the Zia Family (which suspects him of involvement in Ziaur Rahman,s assassination) makes it difficult to see the BNP and JP entering into an alliance. Still, the AL realizes that the JP,s role becomes even more important if the BNP-led alliance boycotts elections. If nothing else, Ershad and the JP have proven that they are survivors and true opportunists.

We can expect they will remain a factor in Bangladeshi politics for the foreseeable future.

Moriarty